

DISTRICT OF NEBRASKA BRANCH EIGHTH CIRCUIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Annual Report June 2004

The Nebraska Branch of the Eighth Circuit Historical Society last met on February 21, 2003. At that general membership meeting the following slate of officers was approved: Mary Hewitt Jones, President; Hon. Timothy J. Mahoney, Vice-President; Frank Mihulka, Treasurer and Catherine Stegman, Secretary. As of this date the Nebraska Branch boasts 95 members and \$16,579.49 in its exchequer. A general membership meeting is contemplated during the annual state bar meeting in Omaha in October, 2004.

Van Pelt History Prize

In 2002 the Nebraska Branch of the Eighth Circuit Historical Society established the Van Pelt History Prize for the best paper on a matter of legal significance submitted by an undergraduate or law student at any of Nebraska's colleges, universities or law schools. The prize is only awarded at the discretion of the Branch, and in 2002 such discretion was not exercised. In 2003 however, at its annual meeting, the officers of the Branch expanded the reach of the prize to include high school students participating in the state finals of "Nebraska History Day," which is the state competition in the National History Day contest. Winners of the four state district history day tournaments converge on the Nebraska Wesleyan University campus in Lincoln for the state competition in mid-April every year. The competition includes submissions in various categories, including papers, presentations and video documentaries. The top two finishers in each category at the state competition proceeded to the national competition which was held at the University of Maryland in June.

The winner of the Van Pelt Prize this year was Chavonn Davis, representing Loup County High School at Taylor, Nebraska. Ms. Davis made a dramatic presentation about Frances Farmer, a movie star incarcerated against her will in a mental hospital in the State of Washington during the 1930's. The presentation included full stage make-up and a hospital gown as a costume and the language used to describe the conditions and maltreatment of patients can only be described as shocking to the conscience. Efforts by reformers ultimately led to the passage of the federal Mental Health Act of 1983 which makes it unlawful to restrict the liberty of the mentally ill without due process. The award was presented by James W. Hewitt, J.D., Ph.D., History Day Judge and member of the Nebraska Branch and Wesleyan University history faculty. The Van Pelt Prize is one of only five special awards presented and is specifically described as an award "for the best entry utilizing research involving the American judicial system."

The Branch History

The History of the Nebraska Branch is still in the works. Dr. John Wunder, Court Historian and of late President of the Faculty Senate, has advised me that University business, including fending off huge budget cuts and the search for a new University President, has cut into his writing time. Accordingly, he has asked a former graduate assistant and newly minted Ph.D., (who is also a lawyer), to join him in the writing. Dr. Wunder will begin a sabaatical in January 2005 so we are hopeful the project will again march along with some alacrity.

Respectfully submitted,

Mary Hewitt Jones